

On The Ambiguous Status of Pleasure in Bentham's Theory Of Fictions

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The core statement of Bentham's utilitarianism has often been attacked for resting on a principle containing two superlatives. The ambiguous status of pleasure has drawn less attention. In some texts, pleasures and pains seem to be real entities that could, in principle, be valid objects for calculation. This is clear, for instance, in *Logical arrangements*, when Bentham refers to that "the class of political, including legal, fictitious entities, in respect to which by indication of the relation which the import of the word in question bears in common to the fundamental ideas of pain and pleasure a distinct and fixed meaning is thus given to a numerous tribe of words" (Bowring III, 286). But in other texts, such as *The Influence of Natural Religion on the Temporal Happiness of Mankind*, Bentham seems to distinguish clearly between pleasures and pains: pains are usually much more vivid and pressing than pleasures as well as more continuous. Moreover, if culture and civilization had done nothing to make sense of pains, to attempt to minimize and root them out, they would be much more numerous than pleasures. One can then ask whether the theory of fictions can in truth consider both pleasure and pain as real entities. In *The Influence of Natural Religion...*, Bentham opposes explicitly the 'natural' character of pain to pleasure, a "secondary formation, something superadded to the satisfaction of our wants by a farther reach of artifice." "Want and pain are natural; satisfaction and pleasure, artificial and invented."

As "artificial and invented", pleasures then may be seen as *fictitious*, especially by returning to the ancient Latin notion of *fictio*. In other words, when one attempts to understand the status of pleasure and pain in Bentham, one has to revise the meaning commonly ascribed to "real and fictitious entities". The paper will suggest several steps towards such a revision and question the link between pain and pleasure on the one hand, and the requisites of calculation on the other hand.